

Thoughts from a Social Worker: My 6-year old Niece Thinks it's "Vacation Time!!!"

(Tips & Suggestions for Young Children Around Our "New Reality"-March 2020...)

It was Monday morning- the first full day of state sanctioned school closings for most of us in NY state when my Niece kept shrieking with delight, "We are on VACATION TiTi" -the oft' used term of endearment for Tia or Aunt- "its vacation in the middle of the school year!" She exclaimed with pure joy and certainty. Now to be fair she is six years old and when she left school on Friday for the weekend, there was still uncertainty around how this unprecedented happening would be handled, prohibiting her teacher (and all of us) from comprehensively explaining that there is going to be unparalleled "take home" work and that "Kindergarten" would be effectively taking place from home in the coming weeks. And yes, we have always been a family who valued the importance of doing extra schoolwork at home and reinforcing the school days' lesson. However, recent events have made it so that the day's lesson isn't just reinforced at home, it also needs to take place at home! In her six-year old mind this is understandably a foreign concept because let's face it, "HOME" on a "school day" typically meant either: you are home sick and relegated to rest and fluids or... "VACATION"!

Among the many stressors of this time, it was apparent that we were going to have to explain to my Niece, we'll call her 'Belle', the "new reality" of our collective near future: an increased structure to the day at home and "school" ultimately taking place in her two bedroom apartment without playgrounds, other classmates or any of the historical context that she was accustomed to. Belle was still fantasizing about this interpreted "vacation"; I started to sweat and feel overwhelmed.

Right then "it" came to me: "YOU are a Social Worker Silly", and for those of us caretakers who aren't, we ARE the Adults who set the tone in our households; and if we were giving ourselves advice we would probably start by encouraging a few deep breaths, strategize and come from a "Strengths Based Perspective" -the Positive. I started by having Belle sit down with me in a quiet comfortable space and explained the truth in language she understands.

1. **"Your school building is closed and you will not be going for the rest of the month. Grownups made that decision because it is the best way to keep everyone safe right now so we don't pass on germs."** *It is always important to follow up with asking the child "what do you understand about all of this?" / "Are there things you are worried or scared about?" That way you can address any misconceptions, natural anxieties and concerns the child may have.
2. **Explain that even though the child won't be going into their school building every day, it is not "vacation" time like "Summer Vacation"/ "Holiday Breaks", etc.** *Most schools have either provided "hard copy packet" or "online learning" for their students; this is a

good time to show them the kind of work that they will be doing with adults from home and talk about how it probably feels like more than their usual homework. Give the child the opportunity to express how they feel about that- are they worried or nervous about getting the work done? Listen to those “worries” or concerns and then reassure the child that “we are all in this together” and grownups, parents, caretakers, babysitters, etc. will be here to help.

3. **Make the child a part of the “school based from home” process!** Children excel when they feel empowered. Create a checklist of important things and ask for the child’s input:

*-Where is a quiet, comfortable and appropriate workspace in the home? *The child can identify an existing space OR a new one can be identified, for example, “the banquette in the kitchen is comfy and I can concentrate there.”*

*-Create a routine. Children thrive with routine & structure even when it seems they resist it. * “Let’s start each day with your morning routine.” (hygiene, breakfast, etc. **Keeping mealtime and bedtime routines are very important, especially during these uncertain times.) Then you can offer choices where applicable like “Would you like to start learning with sight words, reading or numbers work?” This makes the child feel in control of some aspects of their learning and it also leaves room for “varied learning styles”- perhaps the child is more apt to retain a subject like math in the afternoon after they have been awake for some time, etc.*

*- Incorporate Fun & Engaging Learning activities like *educational games, *arts & crafts and *self-awareness” activities like drawing a “Strengths Portrait”: on a poster board or even two blank pieces of paper taped together and have the child identify the skills they excel in and their positive character traits: “I’m a good listener” ~they can draw an ear; “I love to read”~ they can draw a book; “I am kind”~ they can color a heart/draw a picture with a friend.*

*- Schedule time for age appropriate “meditation” or “mindfulness practice” each day. *There are so many of these resources online; GOOGLE some ahead of time and then provide the child with age appropriate choices. It can be as simple as “STAR Breathing” (a technique easily found online- these are healthy habits to start incorporating into children’s lives at any/ early age.*

*- Create a “Rewards System”/ “Positive Reinforcement”/ “Checklist” so the child can see their progress and hear validation from you. *The child can check off “I read all my sight words today”, “I completed my math work”. Children are more likely to engage happily and enjoy learning when they feel accomplished.*

-Leave time for healthy play; it is imperative to a child’s development.

And Remember to take care of yourself! When children see and feel the adults around them setting a calm, rational tone, they too will feel more secure. There are many avenues for guidance like ADAPP, a NY Archdiocese support resource. In Faith and Togetherness we will face these uncertain times and be the greatest comfort to the children in our lives! ...In the back of her little mind Belle may still be hoping for a trip to “Disney” 😊 but I know that our conversation and open communication eased her uncertainty and set expectations about this new reality that resulted in her feeling increased security and even more excited about learning!

Stay Safe & Be Well,

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